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SUBJECT: PFDJ POLITICAL CHIEF ON DARFUR, SOMALIA AND THE
STATE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

Classified By: AMB Scott H. DeLisi, for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. The Ambassador met with People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) Political Director Yemane Ghebreab on December 12. On Sudan, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) remains hopeful - unrealistically so it appears for now) that it may still play a role in helping to mediate between Khartoum and Darfurian rebels. Regarding Somalia, Ghebreab was sharply critical of USG policy while the Ambassador reminded him that the GSE had no credibility criticizing foreign intervention, such as the proposed AU force, so long as the GSE continues to send weapons and military trainers into Somalia to support the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC). The Ambassador also emphasized to Ghebreab the negative consequences for bilateral relations if the GSE continues to refuse visas for official TDYers and otherwise to impede the functions of U.S. Embassy operations. End Summary.

Darfur

12. (C) Ambassador inquired about the status of the proposal for an Eritrean-mediated conference between the DPA non-signatories and the Government of National Unity (GNU). Ghebreab said "they were still working on it." Ghebreab noted that the GSE still was seeking a role for Chad in the process as well but that the last meeting in Tripoli, at which Chad had been present as well, tensions had clearly remained high between Chad and Sudan. Getting the GNU to accept a Chadian role was clearly going to be difficult, he opined. When asked about the multitude of initiatives for working with the DPA non-signatories, Ghebreab noted that no one had been "keen" on Libya's leadership and, in the end, the GNU had reaffirmed its interest in the Eritreans mediating. The Ambassador asked Ghebreab his view of Egypt's role, to which Ghebreab replied that Egypt wants to help but doesn't see itself as playing a leading role. Ghebreab expressed his view that AU/UN-led negotiations showed little promise. According to Ghebreab, Bashir has said that such negotiations were a non-starter, in part because he believes that the DPA non-signatories are not prepared to take the idea seriously.

13. (C) Ambassador commented that the U.S. was deeply concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Darfur and the need for movement on the proposal for an AU/UN hybrid force. He voiced his concern about reports that the Sudanese President was unlikely to follow through on commitments made in Abuja and Ghebreab agreed that it appears unlikely that President Bashir will accept a hybrid force. The Ambassador said the USG has concerns about Eritrea's own position on Darfur; he noted that the GSE too has opposed efforts to put a UN force into Darfur and previously sought to minimize the seriousness of the humanitarian crisis there.

He told Ghebreab that the GSE's actions in the face of the severe human rights problems in Darfur very much affect the credibility of the GSE's proposed mediation role. In the face of increasing violence there, this is even more of a concern. Without specifically addressing Eritrea's stance, Ghebreab did note that in recent conversations with National Congress Party and Darfur non-signatory interlocutors, he had encouraged them to honor the Cessation of Hostilities agreement, but neither side seemed interested. So long as both sides continue to believe in the superiority of their forces, or are convinced they need to make military gains to bolster their negotiating posture, they will continue to pursue a militarily edge, he posited.

Somalia

14. (C) On Somalia, Ghebreab commented (predictably) that UNSC Resolution 1725 was bad policy and would not serve the interests of Somalia, the region, or the U.S. The Somalis should be left alone to settle their internal disputes without foreign interference. The Ambassador challenged

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Ghebreab on the credibility of the GSE's public statements denouncing foreign intervention in Somalia, given that Eritrea is providing weapons and personnel support to the CIC. Without denying Eritrean support to the Courts, Ghebreab characterized Somalia as a "lopsided problem" with the greatest issue being Ethiopia's misplaced policies and occupation of Somali territory. "If you don't want Eritrea to do anything in Somalia, you have to push out Ethiopia," he said.

15. (C) Ghebreab said the GSE's objective was the reconstitution of Somalia, and if there were no external support propping up the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), then the TFG would not exist. If the U.S. wishes to play a role in reconstituting Somalia (and he pointedly noted that he doesn't believe the U.S. wants this), then we should not have supported the warlords who have been destabilizing the country. The CIC has brought a semblance of peace and order to Somalia and without foreign intervention would likely be able to extend this to the rest of the country, he concluded. The Ambassador countered that what "progress" the CIC had made in Somalia was hardly peaceful but by means of force of arms. Moreover, their "progress" which came with the support of external actors such as Eritrea, might have allowed the CIC to impose its will on the population but this was no guarantee that the Courts enjoyed the widespread popular support Ghebreab asserted. Recognizing that the U.S. and GSE had very different assessments of the best way forward in Somalia, the Ambassador closed by offering Ghebreab his view that the GSE's benign characterization of CIC intentions would likely prove to be mistaken.

Bilateral Operational Problems

16. (C) Turning to the bilateral relationship, the Ambassador acknowledged that while this issue did not fall directly in Ghebreab's official area of responsibility, as Political Chief of the PFDJ, he wanted to alert him to a looming

problem affecting the Embassy's ability to operate. (Note: Ghebreab is, in fact, one of the key policy advisors to President Isaias on issues related to the relationship with the USG.) The Ambassador outlined the range of operating problems created by the GSE's continuing denial of visas for TDY support staff, mentioning as examples refusals for our regional medical personnel, OBO building contractors, and technical staff for repair and maintenance of our buildings and systems. The situation has reached the point, he said, where the Embassy's operational integrity is being eroded by the GSE. As a result, the post is reviewing whether we can continue to operate in-country at current staffing levels or whether we will need to modify our operations and reduce our presence and services. As an example, the Ambassador mentioned the current suspension of NIV services due to the GSE's refusal to issue visas for our TDY consular officers. The GSE to date, he continued, has provided no reasons for the denial of these visas, shown no consistency in its visa-issuing procedures and offered no assistance toward rectifying the problem.

17. (C) The Ambassador recalled a similar conversation with Ghebreab a year ago, when he had warned of the consequences if the GSE maintained travel restrictions on diplomatic personnel in Asmara. The GSE had in fact intensified the restrictions and the result was the unfavorable outcome of reciprocal travel restrictions on Eritrean diplomats in the U.S. The Ambassador noted he did not want to see the visa issue follow a similar path -- but made it clear that the USG could not continue to accept the status quo. The Ambassador asked whether the GSE was pursuing a deliberate course of trying to push out the U.S. Embassy by making it impossible to operate in-country, because that was the conclusion most likely to be drawn from the GSE's actions. If this was not the case, the GSE's choices were nonetheless moving us in that direction. Ghebreab commented that while he was not fully aware of day-to-day operational issues between the diplomatic community and the GSE, he did not believe the GSE was pursuing a deliberate policy of harassment. On a

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personal level, he added, he believed that the U.S. and Eritrea needed to re-engage in a productive relationship on both an operational and policy level.

Comment

18. (C) Ghebreab, like many of the government officials, has been traveling in recent weeks. While the meeting was intended largely to "catch-up" with Ghebreab on a range of issues, the Ambassador also wished to use the opportunity to clearly relay the message of the seriousness of GSE actions in continuing to refuse our official visa requests and the potential consequences. This message has been reiterated in different venues for many weeks with our MFA contacts - with little forward progress. While Ghebreab seemed surprised at the extent of the problem, whether the message will get back to those responsible for resolving the visa imbroglio is unknown. Post will continue to emphatically deliver this message through the limited governmental channels open to us.

We think that Ghebreab likely does believe it is important to Eritrea to re-engage with the USG but note the care he took to express the thought in terms of his personal opinion rather than as representing the GSE's views. We fear that no matter how much Ghebreab and others like him might worry that the GSE is going too far in pushing the USG away, President Isaias and others in the government are unlikely to shift course any time soon.

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